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ABSTRACT

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Dimensions of Self-Concept in Preschool Children

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Abstract

Self-descriptive data from 48 children, 8 male and 8 female 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds, indicated the salience of activity as a dimension of the preschooler's self-concept. Analysis of responses to the 2 most open-ended measures yielded 9 response categories: actions, relationships, body-image, possessions, personal labels, gender, age, evaluation, and personal characteristics and preferences; but only responses in the action category showed relatively high frequency and stability. All age groups also showed significantly greater preference for action- than for body-referent statements.

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There is an extensive literature in the self-concept area within which three general characteristics can be noted. First, an almost exclusive restriction to study of self-concept in school age children and adults, second, an emphasis on the evaluative or self-esteem component almost to the exclusion of concern with the developing content of self-descriptions, and third,--while the question of the content of the young child's self-concept has not been addressed directly--there has been at least an implicit according of primacy in self-conception to body-image in theoretical conceptions from the time of William James to the present.

The goal of the present study was twofold: first, to describe the content of the preschool child's self-concept, and, second, to test an alternative to the hypothesis of body-image salience in self-concept. Our hypothesis--that perceived action competencies may be a major feature of the young child's self-concept--was suggested by consideration of some recent research in language development which indicates that the dynamic aspects of the child's environment are the first to be conceptualized by him, by Erikson's theory which suggests centrality of action components in early self-definition, and by Charles Horton Cooley's theory in which awareness of efforts to control objects is regarded as basic to early self-feeling.

The study, then, investigated two questions: first, what are the dimensions which 3-to-5-year-olds use to describe or define themselves, and second, is activity or is body-image a primary component of the preschooler's self-concept.

Method

Forty-eight children, eight male and eight female 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds, were tested individually by the same experimenter and, to determine stability, were retested after a mean interval of 6 weeks.

Four self-concept measures were used, selected to include a variety of procedures ranging from an unstructured open-ended interview procedure to a structured questionnaire. In the interview, the child was asked for statements which would be "best" to include in something the experimenter would write "to tell about you." In the second procedure, the child was asked to complete in as many ways as possible first the sentence (Mary) is ____ and then the slightly more structured (Mary) is a girl who____. The wording for the first two measures was chosen to minimize any possible biasing of the child's responses toward action or body statements. In the third measure, a more directive procedure, three types of prompts were used. Each series was started, in the form of an experimenter self-description and question to the child, with the following respective prompts: "I can walk. Can you walk? What <u>else</u> can you do?" "I am happy., etc." "I have a face., etc." The fourth measure, a fully-structured question-

naire designed to directly compare preference for action-referent vs body-referent self-descriptions, consisted of 15 sentence pairs, each of which included one body-description item and one statement regarding an activity children can perform. The child was asked to select the one sentence from each pair which was "best" to include in what was to be written about him/her.

Results

For the first three measures all response protocols were inspected by the experimenter and responses were judged to fall into the following nine categories: actions, subdivided into habitual acts, acts of competence, and helping and obedient acts, adult and peer relationships, body-image, possessions, personsl labels, gender, age, evaluation, and personal characteristics and preferences. Twenty randomly selected protocols were analyzed independently by a second coder and interjudge agreement was 97%.. Responses to the questionnaire were scored for number of action-statement choices.

The major findings of the study were the following: Due to low frequencies of responding to the first two measures, responses to these measures were combined for analysis. The greatest percentage of responses to the first two measures for both test and retest fell within the action category for both boys and girls in each age group, with response frequencies in the remaining categories being low and variable. Response frequencies to the I can-I am-I have measure, over all age

groups, were greatest in the action and body-image categories. A test of the difference between these two categories was not significant on test 1; but test 2 analysis did show a main effect of response category, with action being greater than body-image response frequencies for all age groups.

For the body/action choice, analyses of variance showed no age or sex effects. Groups were therefore collapsed; and a correlated sample *t* test indicated significantly greater frequency of action-statement choices for both tests 1 and 2.

Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were calculated to determine test-retest stability. Since in measures 1 and 2 only the action category, and in measure 3 only action and body-image categories represented a consistently substantial proportion of total response frequencies, correlations were determined for these response frequencies only. For the body/action choice, action-preference scores were used to determine stability. In addition, Kuder-Richardson formula 20 reliability coefficients for the body/action choice measure were available for each age and sex group. The stability coefficients showed a lack of stability in body-image responding but in general a trend towards greater action response stability with age, with boys showing greater stability than girls at all ages; and Kuder-Richardson reliability coefficients indicated the same age trends and sex differences.

Discussion

The data seemed to indicate, then, that activity was indeed the most salient dimension of the self-concepts of the preschoolers studied. Further, low frequencies of responding and lack of stability of response for categories other than activity suggested that no other dimension of self-awareness accounts for a substantial portion of the structure of the young child's self-concept, and that the other dimensions addressed are rather weakly formed and variable during the 3 to 5 age period.

Our study, then, provided a beginning insight into the nature of the preschool child's self-definition, which seemed to include as its primary and most stable aspect the actions the child can and does perform. Further research, especially longitudinal, is needed to reaffirm the findings of this study and to begin to draw a picture of the development of the child's self-conception, of its changing nature and differentiation.